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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR BROWNFIELD'S VISIT TO QUIBDS, CHOCS ON MARCH 28, 2008

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. The Ambassador traveled on March 28 to the predominately Afro-Colombian town of Quibds, Chocs to meet local military, political and economic figures, civil society leaders, and university students. Chocs is the department with the highest percentage of Afro population in Colombia-about 90%. The Ambassador also visited USG-funded social and economic development projects. His interlocutors underscored that improvements in the regional security situation reflect increased confidence in the GOC and provide opportunities for economic growth. The Ambassador emphasized the USG's continued commitment to social programs and initiatives in the region, the role of the private sector in generating economic growth, and USG commitment to securing approval of the Free Trade Agreement between the US and Colombia. End Summary.

Improved Security Fuels Economic Growth

¶2. (U) During his March 28 trip to Quibdo, the Ambassador met with Department of Chocs Secretary of the Interior Cristobal Cordoba Mosquera and Quibds Mayor Francis Ceballos. Mosquera and Ceballos agreed that the security situation in the region seemed to have improved and that this could lead to economic growth. The meeting was held the day after the arrest of nine lawyers associated with the Governor's law firm on corruption charges. In his remarks to the press, the Ambassador underscored that corruption was an issue that Colombian institutions must address.

¶3. (SBU) Local Quibds Army commander, Colonel Luis Javier Perez Orellanos and national police commander, Colonel Jos Javier Herrera Velandi, presented the Ambassador with an overview of operations and challenges within the Chocs Department. They noted that the tropical jungle topography and the 479km Atrato River make the region a haven for drug-trafficking and other operations by Colombia's illegally armed groups. These security challenges are exacerbated by underdeveloped transportation infrastructure, lack of sufficient military presence and law enforcement riverine capabilities, and the presence of two Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) fronts (the 34th and 57th) that handle logistics between Panama and FARC units throughout the rest of Colombia. In spite of these challenges and substantive numbers of internally displaced persons within this region, both civil society and public security forces agreed that the overall security situation in the region had improved, reflecting increased confidence in the GOC.

¶4. (U) Elsa Delgado, Executive Director of the Quibds Chamber of Commerce, opened a luncheon and roundtable discussion with the

Chamber's board of directors by describing the challenges and opportunities facing the economy in Chocó. Chamber President Martin Sanchez and others stated that better infrastructure was needed to advance the region's economic development. They noted the importance of improved roads to the coast and the interior, as well as construction of a Pacific coast port. The Ambassador encouraged the private sector to generate economic growth, highlighted the importance of corporate social responsibility programs, and emphasized the USG's commitment to securing approval of the Free Trade Agreement between the U.S. and Colombia.

USG Commitment to Social Programs

¶15. (U) The Ambassador visited the Quibdó Justice House—an institution that combats domestic violence and promotes community-based conflict resolution by providing access to all government agencies at a single location. He met with its Coordinator and representatives of key institutions including the Regional Ombudsman's Office, Public Defender's Office, and the Regional Prosecutor's Office and encouraged their efforts at promoting peace in the region.

¶16. (U) The Ambassador also met representatives of five U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supported civil society organizations that advocate for Afro-Colombians, indigenous communities, and women's and children's rights. They outlined problems faced by communities in the region, including alleged human rights violations by illegal armed groups, the challenges of limited access to health and education services, food insecurity, and gender and race discrimination.

¶17. (U) The Ambassador visited the Pedro Grau and Arola School to highlight the USG's ongoing commitment to displaced and vulnerable children and the importance of investing in education. The Ambassador toured the school's vocational training center and participated in a school-wide assembly in a multipurpose auditorium,

both of which were constructed with USAID funds. He encouraged the students to take advantage of the school's educational and vocational training opportunities and donated books and other didactic materials to the school's library.

¶18. (U) The Ambassador also visited the Documentation Center of Afro-Colombian Cultures at the Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó and met twelve USG-funded Martin Luther King (MLK) Fellows for a dialogue on bilateral relations and educational opportunities in the United States.

Successful Press Coverage

¶19. (U) A television crew from Telemundo, the second-largest Spanish language content producer in the world and second-largest SL TV network in the United States, accompanied the Ambassador during his visit to Quibdó. Telemundo used their footage to create an eight-minute documentary reflecting a day in the life of the Ambassador. The piece aired on a prominent investigative news show on a Colombian national television channel, Canal Uno, a week after the Ambassador's visit. Colombia's major nationwide television channels, RCN and Caracol, featured the Ambassador's visit on their midday news broadcast, guaranteeing ample coverage of the visit. Several broadcast outlets also reported the Ambassador's trip on the evening news. His animated dialogue with a CNP police dog was a particularly high moment in the report.

¶10. (U) Comment. Chocó is the poorest department in Colombia with the highest proportion of Afro-Colombians. In social and economic terms, when quality of life improves in Chocó, then Colombia has truly begun to emerge from the dark days of the 1980's and 1990's. We saw evidence of progress on this visit, but they still have a long way to go. End comment.

BROWNFIELD